DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 980 EC 306 555

TITLE	Adapted Physical Education Teacher. Careers in Special Education and Related Services.
INSTITUTION	National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, Reston, VA.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1996-00-00
NOTE	5p.
CONTRACT	H030E30002
AVAILABLE FROM	National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1598; toll-free telephone: 800-641-7824; e-mail: ncpse@cec.sped.org; World Wide Web: http://www.cec.sped.org/ncpse.htm
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adapted Physical Education; Certification; *Disabilities; Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Employment Opportunities; Employment Qualifications; Evaluation; Higher Education; Inclusive Schools; Minimum Competencies; *Occupational Information; Personality Traits; *Physical Education Teachers; Student Motivation; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

Designed for high school students interested in careers in special education and related services, this leaflet outlines the role of the adapted physical education teacher. It addresses the nature of the work, the education required, personal qualities that teachers should have, job outlook and advancement, and how to prepare for a career as a adapted physical education teacher. Adapted physical education teachers are described as helping students with mild, moderate, and severe disabilities participate in physical education classes. They use the results of medical, psychological, sociological, and educational assessments to study the nature and causes of disabilities and to design appropriate physical activities. The educational requirements for an adapted physical education teacher vary by state. Approximately 17 states have specific certification requirements for adapted physical education, which usually includes a bachelor's degree in physical education with 6-18 credits and some type of practicum in adapted physical education. Adapted physical education teachers need to believe in the value of physical exercise for every student and be able to motivate all students in an inclusive classroom. A profile of an adapted physical education teacher is provided to illustrate the challenges and benefits of the job. (CR)

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CAREERS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RELATED SERVICES

Adapted Physical Education Teacher

Twenty-seven middle schoolers quickly take their positions on the gymnasium floor in a school near Washington, D.C. They know that after 10 minutes of warm-up exercises, the teacher will bring out the basketballs for one of their favorite class activities. Starting with neck stretching, the group begins its workout. Most of the students complete 10 jumping jacks to warm up the muscles in their legs and shoulders. Tony, who has Down syndrome, taps one foot in rhythm with his classmates. When the teacher demonstrates sit-ups, many students proceed to imitate her actions. Shawna has been stretching in her own way. She then quietly slips out of her wheelchair onto the floor, bends her body to a comfortable position, and raises her head to the counting of the sit-ups.

Supervising this symphony of motion is the adapted physical education teacher, who adapts or changes the curriculum to fit the needs of each student. Because these teachers individualize curriculum and instruction for every student in their class, one observer has called them coaches, counselors, and cheerleaders.

Nature of Work

The benefits of physical activity for children are well documented, and since 1975, all students in the United States have been entitled to a free public education in the least restrictive environment. Children with disabilities can no longer be excluded from physical education classes. Depending on their abilities, they are now included in the full realm of activities, from individual developmental activities, to exercise and to team sports.

Suppose, for example, that a 4th grade physical education class is learning the basics of bowling. Many skill abilities are represented. Generally speaking, the children without disabilities in this age group can follow simple directions, recognize boundaries, control certain muscular movements, locate an assigned object such as a bowling pin, wait for a turn, and show simple reasoning ability.

The children with disabilities also learn to bowl because their adapted physical education teacher has altered the equipment or game rules for them. Youngsters with limited upper body movement might need a portable ramp to help deliver their ball. Students in wheelchairs could use a bowling ball pusher, similar to a shuffleboard device. Students with impaired eyesight or particular cognitive disabilities might benefit by stepping on brightly colored vinyl footprints that lead to the bowling lane. Children who have difficulty gripping a traditional bowling ball might have greater success by throwing a beanbag or kicking a lightweight ball at the pins instead.

Adapted physical education teachers are trained to teach children with a variety of physical and mental skill levels. Sometimes a physical education class includes only children with disabilities. Sometimes the class includes all students. Regardless of enrollment combinations, adapted physical education teachers utilize the results of medical, psychological, sociological, and educational assessments for children with disabilities. They study the nature and causes of mild, moderate, and severe disabling conditions, and learn what kinds of physical activities are appropriate for each.

They know what levels of activity are safe for students with asthma, and can specifically recommend certain swimming strokes that have minimal respiratory stress. With the assistance of a physical therapist, an adapted physical education teacher can develop a muscular rehabilitation program for a child with cerebral palsy. And a student who has mild retardation can enjoy catching, throwing, and tagging activities in class because the adapted physical education teacher knows how to teach skills for a student's mental age as well as his or her chronological age.

Adapted **physical education teachers believe in the value of physical exercise for every student, regardless of ability level.**

In order to stay well informed about their students who are disabled, adapted physical education teachers in schools often rely on expertise from other faculty members. Physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, school nurses, and classroom teachers are among the professionals who contribute valuable information to the adapted physical education teacher. Together, they prepare an individualized education program (IEP) for each child. Parents are also included in the goal-setting process.

Sometimes other faculty members can also enrich the curriculum in surprising ways. One adapted physical education teacher, for example, heard students complain that they were bored with the class's warm-up exercises. They wanted to quit. The teacher knew the warm-ups were important to continue, so he asked the school's Spanish instructor for a little translation help. Within days, the physical education class became bilingual during the aerobic exercises. The teacher called out the directions for each exercise in Spanish and the students enthusiastically repeated the Spanish phrases for "touch your toes," "bend your knees," etc.

Education Required

Federal law states that persons must be "qualified" to provide physical education services to students with disabilities, but the definition of qualified is determined by each state. Approximately 17 states in 1996 had specific certification requirements for adapted physical education, which usually included a B.A. or B.S. degree in physical education, with 6-18 credits and some type of practicum in adapted physical education.

To illustrate the broad range of teaching levels, California gives credentials to teachers to teach adapted physical education in any grade from kindergarten through Grade 12. Other states authorize adapted physical education teachers to teach only at the elementary level or only at the secondary level. Most undergraduate students receive only one or two classes specifically in adapted physical education.

Although the term adapted physical education was defined in 1952 by the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, national standards were not developed until 1994. The National Consortium for Physical Education and Recreation for Individuals with Disabilities (NCPERID) has developed national standards for entry level adapted physical education teachers based on state requirements and competencies required in the field. NCPERID is currently developing a national certification examination based on these standards. When it is approved, adapted physical education teachers will have the same kind of national certification that now exists for physical therapists and occupational therapists.

Personal Qualities

Adapted physical education teachers believe in the value of physical exercise for every student, regardless of ability level. They are patient with students who learn at a slower pace, and they can motivate students with disabilities and students without disabilities in the same classroom. These professionals are good listeners and observers of human behavior, and respect the expertise of other professionals who work with students. Adapted physical education teachers are creative and resourceful instructors who possess a high level of physical stamina.

PRACTITIONER PROFILE

Karen Etz

Adapted Physical Education Teacher

Arlington County Schools

Arlington, Virginia

Karen Etz is an adapted physical education teacher at Claremont Early Childhood Center, in Arlington, Virginia. This unusual public school enrolls children only in preschool, kindergarten, first, and second grades. Karen earned a B.S. in physical education at the University of Florida. During her undergraduate course work, Karen worked with children with disabilities for the first time. They weren't shy about showing their appreciation to the young teacher in training who boosted their confidence while they practiced new skills. She decided to specialize in adapted physical education and received a master's degree in 1994 from the University of Virginia.

Several children attending Claremont have disabilities. Some have cerebral palsy, others hearing impairments, have Down syndrome, or cognitive impairments. All participate in physical education classes. Karen is the school's only physical education teacher, although she is occasionally assisted in class by physical therapy staff or occupational therapy staff, or other assistants. Except for two classes that are comprised solely of preschoolers with disabilities, Claremont's students, regardless of ability level, are included in regular physical education classes.

Daily Schedule: Karen teaches seven 30-minute classes, beginning at 8:30 a.m. and ending at 2:20 p.m. Lunch break and recess duty divide the day. She teaches in a carpeted gym or outdoors, and her average class size is 18 students. To accommodate the children's different skill levels, Karen likes to offer choices to them. When she taught a unit on tossing and catching, for example, the youngsters selected scarves or beanbags or balls. When they were learning underhand roll skills for bowling, one child was unable to swing his arm for the underhand motion. So Karen devised a ramp for his ball. He easily lifted the ball, placed it on the ramp, and was ready to bowl with his classmates. Karen frequently confers with faculty members about individual students, and believes communication is the key to being a good teacher. A teacher might report to Karen, for example, that one child works especially well when paired with a certain classmate on projects. Or maybe a particular student was especially restless during morning classroom activities. Although Karen prepares written lesson plans for each class, she often adjusts her class activities based on her own observations and on information from teachers.

Challenges: "Keeping classroom activities fresh and motivating for all the students is the biggest challenge of being an adapted physical education teacher. I want every child to be successful. For example, one kindergartner in my class can jump rope ten times consecutively. Another child in the same class doesn't jump at all because of physical limitations. So she might work on stepping over the jump rope. My job is to find a way to keep both students interested, challenged, and active in something they can do. Obviously, it's important to understand the range of abilities in each class."

Satisfaction: "I really like to work with children. Sometimes children with disabilities feel hesitant about or avoid an activity because they can't do it as well—or in the same manner—as someone else. As a teacher, I like to show them ways we can modify a game or an exercise so they can do it. When a child with disabilities does something he couldn't do before, the achievement just makes the smile bigger. Progress can seem slow at times, but it's exciting to me when a child makes any kind of progress. It's also very satisfying to work in a school where the faculty supports physical education. My principal supported me when I suggested we sponsor a 'family fitness night' of aerobic activities for students and their families. One hundred thirty people came!"

Job Outlook and Advancement

Federal law mandates that public education be provided to children with disabilities, ages 3-21, and the demand for adapted physical education teachers continues to be steady. Because of state differences in certification, it is impossible to know the exact number of adapted physical education teachers currently employed. States are required to report to the federal government the number of special education teachers who work with children with disabilities, but states report the information differently. States have reported as many as 450 and as few as a dozen adapted physical education teachers on their payrolls. While most adapted physical education teachers are employed in K-12 school systems, some are working in early childhood education centers, assisted living residences, nursing homes, and hospitals.

How to Prepare for a Career

Observing an adapted physical education class can be an enlightening experience. Contact the teacher ahead of time to request a class visit. Take notes, and if possible, conclude the visit by discussing some of your questions with the teacher. Summer is an ideal time to volunteer to work with children with disabilities. Inquire about day care centers, camps, and special education programs in schools. To learn about adapted physical education for adults, check with activity directors in nursing homes and retirement centers. They might welcome a volunteer in classes or special events. Community programs that serve children with disabilities, such as Special Olympics, also welcome young volunteers. Become skilled in as many physical activities as possible, and teach a skill or game to a reluctant learner—perhaps an adult who wants swimming lessons but is afraid of the water. At the end of your volunteer experiences, ask someone you respect to write a letter of recommendation for you. It will document your growth as you participate in adapted physical education. And be sure to send a thank you note to the teacher, coach, or administrator who helped you!

Resource Information:

American Association for Active Lifestyles and Fitness
1900 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1589
703-476-3400
1-800-213-7193 ext. 431

National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1589
1-800-641-7824
ncpse@cec.sped.org
http://www.cec.sped.org

The National Consortium for Physical Education and Recreation for Individuals with Disabilities (NCPERID)
405 Emmet Street, Ruffner Hall
Curry School of Education
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA 22903
804/924-6192

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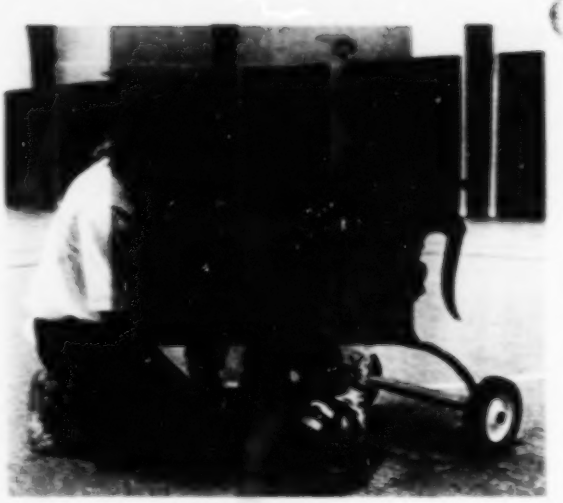

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